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## **The Case for the Primacy of *Visualcy* within a Neoliberal Artschool Curriculum**

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### **Abstract**

Whilst the faculties of literacy and numeracy are rightly recognised as worthy of pedagogical nurturing, this article champions a more venerable articulacy – *visualcy* – crucial to a healthy culture, arguing that the one domain of human inquiry which distinguishes the visual arts from other disciplines is surely that surrounding the faculty of *vision*. The ascendancy within the contemporary artworld of a relational aesthetics is traced through a brief history of the relationships between visual artforms and their socio-political contexts. It is suggested that the shift of emphasis away from the perceptually intriguing is in part a consequence – perhaps unintended – of the neoliberal values permeating the UK Higher Education sector in the last decade. The article ends with a proposal for a visual arts pedagogy based on five key principles of visualcy explored through the medium of drawing, illustrated with work by the author and students.

### **Keywords**

Drawing as language; Visualcy; Haptic values; Distal values; Proximal values; Neoliberalism; Revocational art; Convocational art; Perceptual intrigue; Conceptual intrigue.

### **Preface**

This article prioritises drawing as the most flexible and cost-effective activity fundamental to a visual arts pedagogy at all levels, based upon the premise that the primary endeavour of such pedagogy is to nurture an *intelligence of seeing* (Riley 2008) ultimately applicable to the full range of visual arts practices by imparting knowledge of, and encouraging inquiry about the techniques and processes of structuring light in communicable, visible forms through the study of and experimentation with the ecological and other theories of visual perception (Gibson 1979; Palmer 2002) and the means of visual communication (O'Toole 2011; Maynard 2005). After all, the one domain of human inquiry which distinguishes the visual arts from other disciplines is surely that surrounding the faculty of *vision*. One of our earliest drives<sup>1</sup> as human beings was to record shareable visual equivalents for the perceptual

experiences of natural phenomena we have in common through the most direct means of engaging with, and communicating results of that inquiry: the language of drawing (Riley 2019).

It is my contention that Drawing could subsume *wRiting* to sit comfortably at the centre of the popular aphorism, the ‘3Rs’, (perhaps under its traditional form of *Routing* for the sake of alliteration). The necessity for a class of literate and numerate people to administer the burgeoning system of mass-production/distribution/consumption/waste we call the Industrial Revolution reduced the centrality of *visualcy* from its position in the more balanced educational triumvirate of Literacy, Visualcy and Numeracy. Its diminished role to that of a mere facility for visual decoration was evidenced in the Schools of Design set up by the UK Government Board of Trade from 1837, where its narrowed function was to stimulate a ‘desire to acquire’ in the new class of consumers necessary for a thriving economy. Such was the demise of a fundamental faculty for the development of human inquiry, communication and thus a means to knowledge (Riley 2018). It wasn’t until 1851 that Henry Cole reconstituted the Schools of Design as Schools of Art, revitalising drawing as a means of perceptual inquiry within their curriculum (Macdonald 1973: 91).

### **The Current Problem**

“...unleashing the forces of consumerism is the best single way we’ve got of restoring high academic standards”  
(David Willetts, UK Minister for Universities and Science 2010-14, in McGettigan 2015: 2)

Around ten years ago, in a climate of change which saw the newly-elected Conservative-led coalition UK government implement the Browne Report (2010) enabling HEIs to triple student fees on the assumption that “Graduates go on to higher paid jobs and add to the nation’s strength in the global knowledge based economy” (Browne 2010: 2), the far-sighted historian and theorist of contemporary art, Thierry de Duve (2009:24) was pleading...

...for the maintenance of art schools conceived as crucibles in

which technical *apprenticeship*, theoretical *instruction*, and the *formation* of judgement are brought together...

His plea is evidence of his concern that art schools were in danger of diluting their prime commitment to the development of students' abilities to apply a sound understanding of relevant theories of perception and communication through their material practices, thus equipping them with criteria for the judgement of quality applicable to the full range of visual art activities. De Duve had foreseen the encroachment of a business-studies model<sup>2</sup> of 'professional studies' upon the time devoted to drawing in the art school curriculum, the core study essential to the nurturing of an intelligence of seeing, a pre-requisite for the production of high-quality work.

Even though the latest UK Government-sponsored inquiry led by Philip Augar (May 2019) expresses some doubt about the Browne assumption: "...increasing the sheer volume of tertiary education does not necessarily translate into social, economic and personal good. That depends on the quality, accessibility and direction of study" (Augar 2019: 8), we are yet to see a concerted challenge from art schools in the UK Higher Education (UKHE) sector to the assumption underpinning the Browne report, that high academic qualifications correlate with high salaries, and its consequence, the establishment of modules dealing with business strategies rather than visual inquiry. Dean Kenning (2019:116) indicates the validity of such a challenge:

There is immediately a problem with the student-as-rational-investor model when it comes to creative degrees such as fine art: they are a seriously 'bad bet'. Government commissioned research published in 2011/12 showed that the 'graduate premium' – the extra lifetime earnings of graduates compared with non-graduates – simply does not apply to students of Art and Design courses...

Let's now address the specific aspect of the problem, which is the devaluing of drawing in our education system by dint of the neoliberal policies affecting visual arts curricula from secondary school level through to the UKHE system.

Neoliberalism is generally associated with notions of a free market in which competition is enhanced through economic deregulation and the application of social policies designed to favour profit-oriented business. (Terry Flew 2014 provides an exhaustive analysis of the term.) The Berkeley academic Wendy Brown (2003:1) recognises these factors, but warns us of their cost to the community in general:

... a radically free market: maximised competition and free trade achieved through economic de-regulation...and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent to poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion and environmental destruction.

More specifically in the realm of education at the tertiary level (Radice 2013), the neoliberal mindset is manifested in:

- 1 Top-down university management
- 2 Bureaucratic administrative procedures
- 3 Teaching a curriculum dictated by 'professional practices' emphasising strategies of enterprise and entrepreneurialism
- 4 Research driven by assessment criteria related to economic impact rather than a contribution to original knowledge in the areas of visual culture

One negative outcome of this trend is identified by Andrew McGettigan (2015: 2):

The focus of (neoliberal) policy has been the transformation of higher education into the private good of training and the positional good of opportunity, where the returns on both are higher earnings. Initiation into the production and dissemination of public knowledge? It does not appear to be a concern of current policy.

This situation at the tertiary level of education in the UK, where proficiency in drawing is reported as noticeably reduced (Chorpening 2014: 96), can be traced to the secondary schools, specifically to the effects of neoliberal policies adopted by the agencies responsible for quality assessment of the subject labelled 'Art'. Recent articles by Michelle Fava (2011, 2019) and Chris Owen (2019) trace the demise of drawing in schools partly to accreditation agencies' criteria which don't specify any assessment of drawing *per se*, but instead tacitly condone more immediate image-making technologies (photographic, digital) to provide evidence of 'visual research' in the students' activities. The built-in algorithms of such technologies automatise a crucial mental process; that of finding independent graphic

equivalents for perceptual experiences, for which drawing is best suited. The pressure on schoolteachers to deliver consistent high grades in limited time diminishes any incentive for them to nurture an intelligence of seeing in their students. And when the agencies are in competition for the patronage of education authorities, it is inevitable that assessment criteria become compromised.

The effect of this complex of factors upon the artworld is emerging as a burgeoning of activities loosely labelled ‘visual art’ practised by those *not* fluent in the exploration and communication of visual perceptual phenomena, but who instead test – breach? - the limits of academic credibility of a visually-based discipline by contriving human interactions within various social contexts, activities which I shall term *convocational* for reasons explained below.

### **The Advent of Neoliberalism in the Art Schools: Tracing Artforms and Social Structures**

Whilst it is accepted that no art school can operate independently of its socio-political context, my concern is that the traits of neoliberalism purportedly about freedom of expression and equality, ultimately equate to, in the forthright words of Alana Jelinek (2013: 18), “...hierarchy and systematic exclusion, mediocrity, private monopolism and monoculturalism cloaked in values of freedom and a distorted idea of individual responsibility”. All of which consolidate the deep concerns expressed in this article about the diminished status of perception studies.

In a recent article, Deanna Petherbridge (2019), Professor of Drawing at the Royal College of Art 1995-2001, relates an anecdote from that period about a “...careless madness” to do with attitudes towards the teaching of drawing:

That madness stems from a profound late twentieth-century belief, still prevalent today, that drawing is an entirely individual practice shaped by individual ownership but so free floating that it requires no reference to any larger discourse. That is, drawing can be anything that any artist, art teacher, or museum educator cares to make of it...

(Petherbridge 2019: 2)

A ‘madness’ still prevalent today, indeed! How did this attitude evolve?

In post-Enlightenment periods of history, one of the social functions of art has been to challenge the conventions of visual representation in particular and the *mores* of the artworld in general; those ideological constructions which are so embedded within the cultural context of their social structure that they appear natural. Certain strategies have been developed at certain periods to this end; for example, in his book *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Jacques Ranciere (2009: 49) translates Bertolt Brecht’s neologism *Verfremdungseffekt*<sup>3</sup> as *distanciation*, to identify a period in time when “...humorous distantiation<sup>4</sup> takes the place of provocative shock”. (Ranciere 2009: 52). In other words, a period in time I shall describe as *revocational* art, following on from the Modernist era of what Robert Witkin (1995:57) termed *provocational* art. (I advocate these terms because they draw attention to the essentially *vocative* nature of all artforms: they address the viewer, and their compositional devices serve to position the viewer in terms of mood and attitude towards their content. A full discussion of Witkin’s taxonomy of artforms and my own extrapolations from it may be found in Riley 2013). Table 1 outlines the historical context:

	Paleolithic Period	Renaissance Period	Modernist Period	Post-Modernist Period	Alter-Modernist Period
<b>Social Structure</b>	Co-actional: Non-individual, collective group	Inter-actional: Individual identity, but inter-dependent	Intra-actional: Identity construed relative to others	Multi-actional: Pluralist identities available	Re-actional: Fractured identities
<b>Artform: related to semiotic code</b>	Invocational: Sign and referent are one	Evocational: Sign conjures up referent	Provocational: Process of signification is challenged	Revocational: Conventions of communication challenged	Convocational: Artist as convenor, viewers as participants
<b>Degree of Abstraction</b>	Very low	Low	High	Eclectic mix of abstraction and realism	Suppression of visual representation
<b>Perceptual Mode</b>	Haptic values: Textural qualities	Distal values: Illusions of depth	Proximal values Pattern qualities	Contradictory use of modes	Suppressed visual modes

Table 1 Artforms related to Social Structures

‘Provocational’ art was motivated not by reference to any religious or spiritual source such as those which stimulated what Witkin (1995:56) called the ‘invocational’ intention of cave drawings, or the ‘evocational’ art of the Renaissance period typified by Leonardo’s two spiritually-evocative versions, c1483 and c1495, of *Virgin of the Rocks*, but by the humanism that evolved from the Enlightenment and socio-technological revolutions of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in northern Europe. Such art shifted the representational emphasis from the direct, iconic correlation between the sign and its referent altogether, and drew attention instead to the *process of signification* itself in an effort to ‘distantiate’ or estrange the conventions of the time. The primary function of art was no longer to do with representing anything, but a means of provoking the viewer into a state of awareness of their own responsibilities for making sense of artworks. Marcel Duchamp, with his 1919 *LHOOQ*, was the *agent-provocateur par excellence!*

My term ‘revocational’ art is typified by a Postmodern period in which has been seen the development of a plurality of approaches to art practice and an eclecticism of styles. This

recent period was one in which the constructions of individual identity were complicated not only by the fluctuating states of possibilities of relationships between individuals, but also by an expanding range of available social positions made possible through an expanded awareness of the multiplicity of ideological positions. 'Revocational' art was at once motivated and unmotivated by a plethora of influences, including the historical and the contemporary as well as the spiritual and the material. Such art *revoked* all previous laws and restrictions of conventions so that contradictions and contravisuals abound, realities may be virtual, and the virtual becomes a reality. Attention was drawn to the very membranes themselves that separate internal from external, signifier from signified. In that post-modern period, the Saussurean sign (Saussure 1916) itself had been split, and signifiers floated free from signifieds, all differences and deferrals available once more for our reconsideration and restructuring. For example, we walked around - and through - Damien Hirst's pair of segmentally- shuffled cows in his 1996 installation *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, where the strategy was not only to challenge traditional boundaries between inside and outside, but also conventions of front and rear, which were reversed, interpenetrated. Similarly, we were denied entry to Rachel Whiteread's *House* (de)constructed in 1993, whilst, paradoxically, having access to the interior by means of the cast surfaces of the rooms which formed the exterior of the sculpture. But however much we were conceptually intrigued by such oxymoronic acrobatics, our capacity for perceptual intrigue remained unfulfilled.

So, what of the present period? A Post-revocational, a 'post-Postmodernist' time, one that has been identified as 'Alter-modernism's' in which the artschools' administrative responsibilities (recruitment, retention, even the monitoring of foreign students' movements) are offloaded to academics, who rightly regard their prime responsibilities to be the development,



enhancement and delivery of visually-based curricula informed by research activities (Martin 2016: 2).

Consequences (perhaps unintended, if we are generous in our criticism!) of these managerial trends influenced by neoliberal policy were noted early by Petherbridge who, in her seminal book *The Primacy of Drawing*, warned:

More recently, under the democratic, pluralistic but also hegemonic imperatives of universities...individual practice in art departments has become increasingly fragmented through modular teaching and self-directed learning, with students looking outward to the art market and its officiates.  
(Petherbridge 2010: 232)

Ranciere (2009: 56) describes the activities of this Altermodernist period as “Relational art (which) aims no longer to create objects, but situations and encounters” typified when an artist assumes the role of social engineer, setting up a meeting place and encouraging visitors to engage in social relations of various kinds, as did Ai Weiwei’s 2007 *Fairytale* at Documenta XII, with the ultimate aim of promoting the artist’s profile in a commercialised artworld. Extrapolating further from Witkin’s typology of artforms, I shall label such art ‘convocational’, in the sense that it serves to call together participants. In Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002: 36) words “Through little services rendered, the artist fills in the cracks in the social bond”. But such activities do little to advance understanding of visual perception processes, and contribute nothing to the nurturing of an intelligence of seeing.

Here I point out that language – the written and spoken kind - itself is a fundamental agent of convocation: it is language that binds together members of a particular society; language that forms identity; language structures our realities, naturalises the cultural, the ideological; and more pertinently to my argument, *language filters direct visual perception*.

So perhaps a pedagogy that recognises this impediment to visual perspicacity might inform, might focus an arts practice which brings us back to one of the fundamentals of visual art, *the primacy of drawing* (Petherbridge 2010).

## **A Curriculum for Drawing**

I would advocate a curriculum for the teaching of contemporary visual art practice premised upon five specific aspects of the two fundamental theoretical bases relevant to art production: those of visual perception and visual communication, explored through the most economic means: drawing.

It is suggested that these theoretical bases can inform strategies for the teaching of drawing, specifically, ones which can nurture students' abilities to transform their experiences of the world – perceptual, emotional, imaginal - into articulate (or purposely inarticulate) and coherent (or purposely incoherent) visible forms communicable to others.

The pedagogical strategies are centred upon principles derived from an ecological theory of visual perception first proposed by the visual psychologist James J. Gibson (1979), and specific aspects of visual communication theory developed by the semiotician Michael O'Toole (2011). Both theoretical bases are adumbrated here:

### *Gibson: Organic Perceptual Systems and Levels of Perception*

An ecological approach to the explanation of visual perception argues that we have evolved perceptual systems which resonate with the fields of energy such as light so that we are able to respond and react directly to the environmental information contained in the arrays of light arriving at our eyes.

Such information provides a variety of affordances – possibilities for action - in response to haptic, distal and proximal cues contained in the structure of light. It is this insight of Gibson which allows me to identify and elaborate upon the various *levels of perception* available for our attention; simply put, alternative ways of seeing. The honing of attention to these possibilities of perceptual information through the concentrated practice of observational drawing will, of course, also empower students in their everyday perceptual experiences away from the drawing studio.

### *O'Toole: The Poetic Function of Communication*

Within the studio, the task is to bring together knowledge gleaned from visual perception theory, and the re-vitalisation of relevant aspects of communication theory. Particularly relevant is the work of O'Toole (2011), and his adaptation of Michael A.K. Halliday's (1978) systemic-functional model of language *via* Roman Jakobson's (1958) prime function of all creative production: the *poetic function*, which draws attention to the form of the work in question through the deployment of visual rhetorical tropes such as metaphor, metonym and oxymoron, as well as the poetic strategies of composition such as the manipulation of scale, proportion, contrast, visual rhyming, rhythm, pattern, symmetry/asymmetry.

### **Five premises for a teaching programme of drawing**

#### ***1 Levels of Perception***

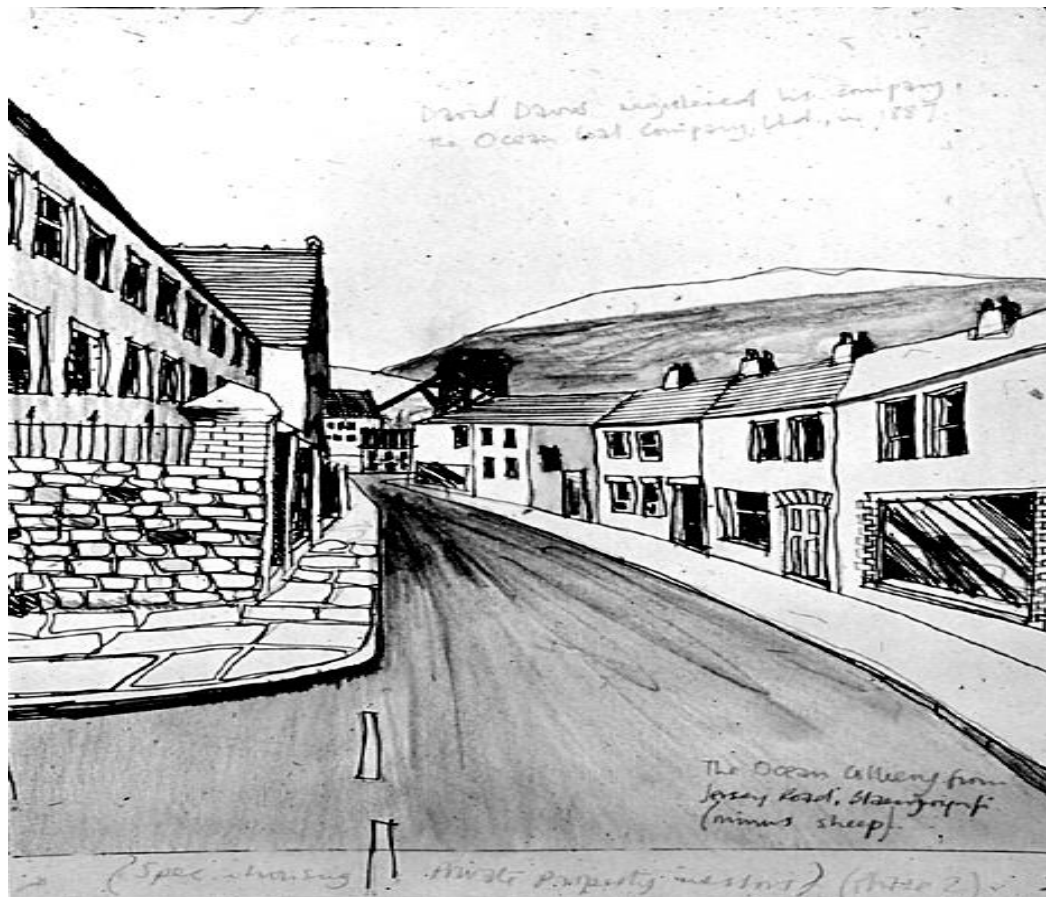
Three levels of visual information crucial to a visual art can be identified in the structure of the light arrays arriving at the eyes (Gibson 1979). Under normal circumstances, our 'seeing for survival' mode need not differentiate between them, but the invariant features of the array may be explored in studio or elsewhere through exercises designed to focus attention on 1) the 'haptic level', at which information about surface qualities which indicate texture and colour may be accessed; 2) the 'distal level', to do with information about relative distance, size, scale and depth of field; and 3) the 'proximal level', which provides information about the overall pattern and rhythm relationships in the visual field as a whole. An example of each level of perception is illustrated in Figures 1 – 3.

The honing of such an intelligence of seeing is crucial if students are to manipulate and control the degree of perceptual intrigue in their work. Because drawing activity demands a level of concentration involving hand/eye coordination, it lends itself to a means of contemplating these channels of perception. It is therefore best positioned to be the means of

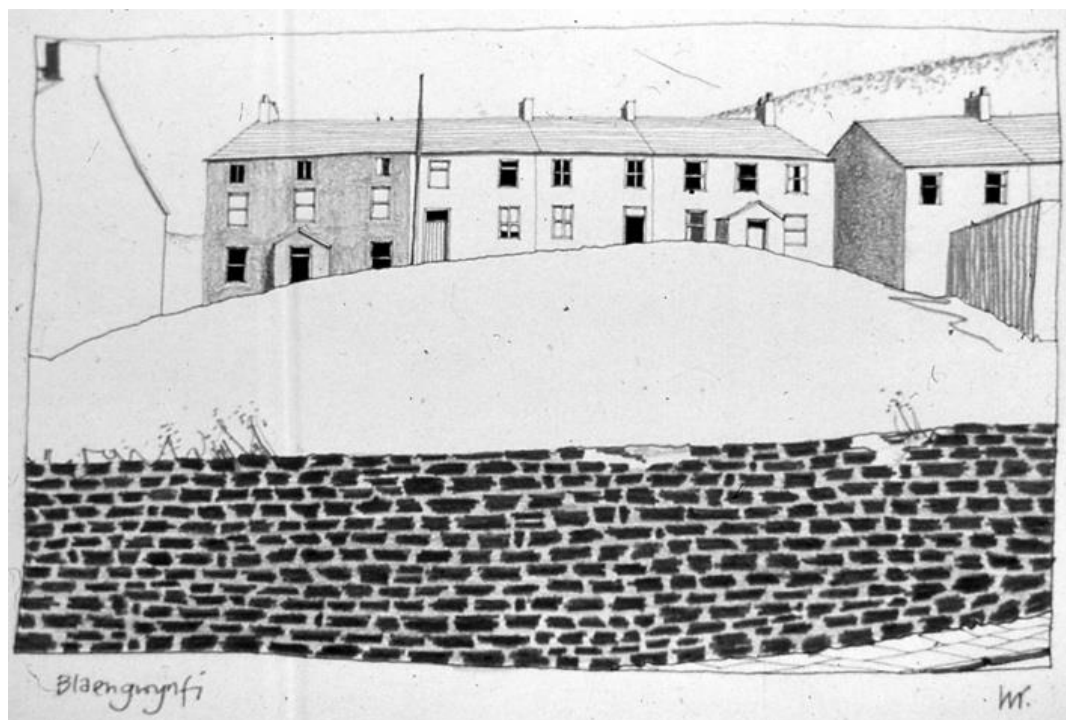
release from our language-based complacency of vision; it is a primary means of making the familiar strange.



**Figure 1** Howard Riley *Haptic values, Abergwynfi* Pencil, pen and ink and crayon on A4 paper.



**Figure 2** Howard Riley *Distal values*, Blaengwynfi. Pencil, pen and ink on A4 paper.



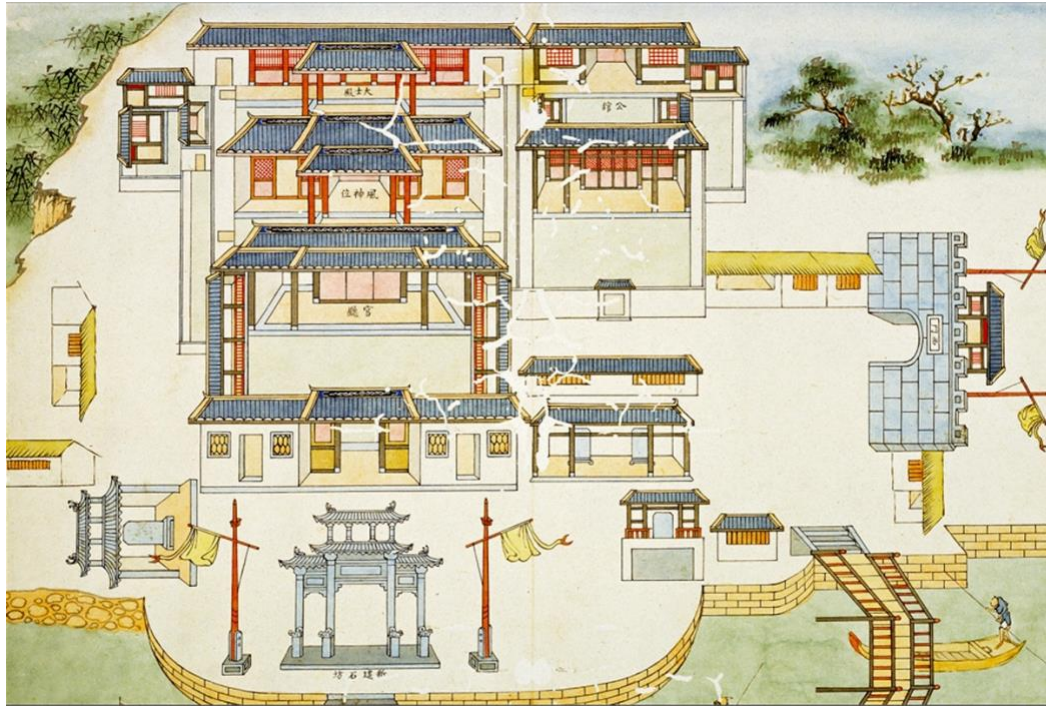
**Figure 3** Howard Riley *Proximal values*, Blaengwynfi. Pencil, pen and ink on A4 paper.

## ***2 Seeing and believing***

The degree of balance between *conceptual intrigue* and *perceptual intrigue* in drawings is proposed as a useful criterion of quality assessment, both for the student and tutors. These two terms may be defined as how a work can afford viewers fresh mental insights on the theme or concept to which the work refers, and how the manipulation of the material qualities of the work may stimulate in the viewer perceptual experiences which cause the gaze to linger, and perceptual assumptions to be challenged.

If students are to develop the capacities necessary to manipulate the balance between conceptual intrigue and perceptual intrigue in artworks, it is essential from the outset that studio projects are designed to encourage students to understand that perception is (1) culturally conditioned, and (2) capable of being ‘tuned’ to different levels of attention. How we see the world is conditioned by what we believe. This is easily illustrated for students by showing the variety of ways that different cultures with differing belief-systems about space–time, for example, have devised to represent the relationship in pictures. Once students are aware of their own ontological constructs, they become more flexible about recognizing the validity of those of others, and also more capable of inventing alternative constructs which can inform the creative production of art.

Figure 4 illustrates how a mixture of geometric projection systems invites the viewer to move towards, around and through the complex of buildings. The artist understood that we experience the world from a moving path of observation, and incorporates that understanding in his geometrical constructions, unlike the assumptions of a static single eye inherent in artificial perspective.



**Figure 4** Jiang Yua-Shu 1778 *Restoration of Official Buildings in the Prefecture of Taiwan*. Album leaf, colours on paper.  
[https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/07/QingDocuments/common/images/selection/img7\\_2s.jpg](https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/07/QingDocuments/common/images/selection/img7_2s.jpg)  
 (Accessed 5 December 2019)

Figure 5 shows an example of a student exploring an existing convention of representing the positions of objects in space. Here, the Australian Aborigine convention of prioritising the location of food and water sources, and the types of landscape likely to be encountered on a journey to such sources has been adapted to codify the pattern of land-use and location of eating-places within her locality. Through this exercise, the student gains insight into the representational conventions of another culture, and is therefore in a position to recognise her own cultural conventions and other alternative constructions of reality.





**Figure 5** Samantha Geizekamp (1<sup>st</sup> year BA) *Journey Through Space*. Gouache on A2 paper.

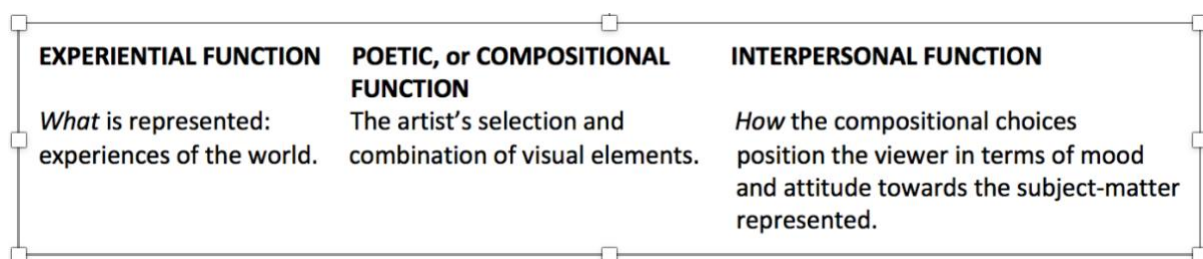
### ***3 Functions of art***

Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, the leading socio-linguist until his recent death in April 2018, elaborated the principle that language emerged at a particular moment in our evolution, and argued that its organization reflects the social context of its evolution (Halliday 2019: 99). It is possible to teach students that drawing similarly functions to construe the human experience: 1) to construct our realities (Riley 2019), and 2) to realise human relationships; creating, maintaining or changing them. Halliday called these two the ‘ideational’ and the ‘interpersonal’ functions of language. But both of these functions depend upon a shared mode of discourse; Halliday’s ‘textual’ function, which in the context of drawing is better identified as the ‘compositional’, or the ‘poetic’ function, acknowledging Jakobson’s (1958) explanation of the poetic function as attracting attention to the formal qualities of the inter-communication, the message – the drawing - itself.



So alongside the exploration of perceptual values and cross-cultural conventions for the representation of space, students would also be introduced to this powerful theoretical basis of visual communication *via* either set projects or student-driven projects. This proposal is not so daunting as it might first appear: students understand at an early stage that a mental concept, an idea for an artwork based upon some aspect of our experiences of the world, needs to be transformed into visible, tangible form in order to be shared within an artworld. The teaching challenge is to impart practical methods which can facilitate such transformation. O'Toole's (2005, 2011, 2019) systemic-functional semiotic model of the visual arts adapts Halliday to produce a proven valuable aid to structuring studio practice (Riley 2008, 2019). He introduces the inter-relationship between the three functions: the ideational or 'experiential' function, the content carried by the mental concept; the 'compositional', or 'poetic' function, the practical processes of selection and combination of visual elements, materials and media in order to realise – make visible – the concept; and the 'modal', or 'interpersonal' function, relating to how those compositional choices might affect viewers, positioning them in terms of mood and attitude towards the concept/artwork. (Figure 6).

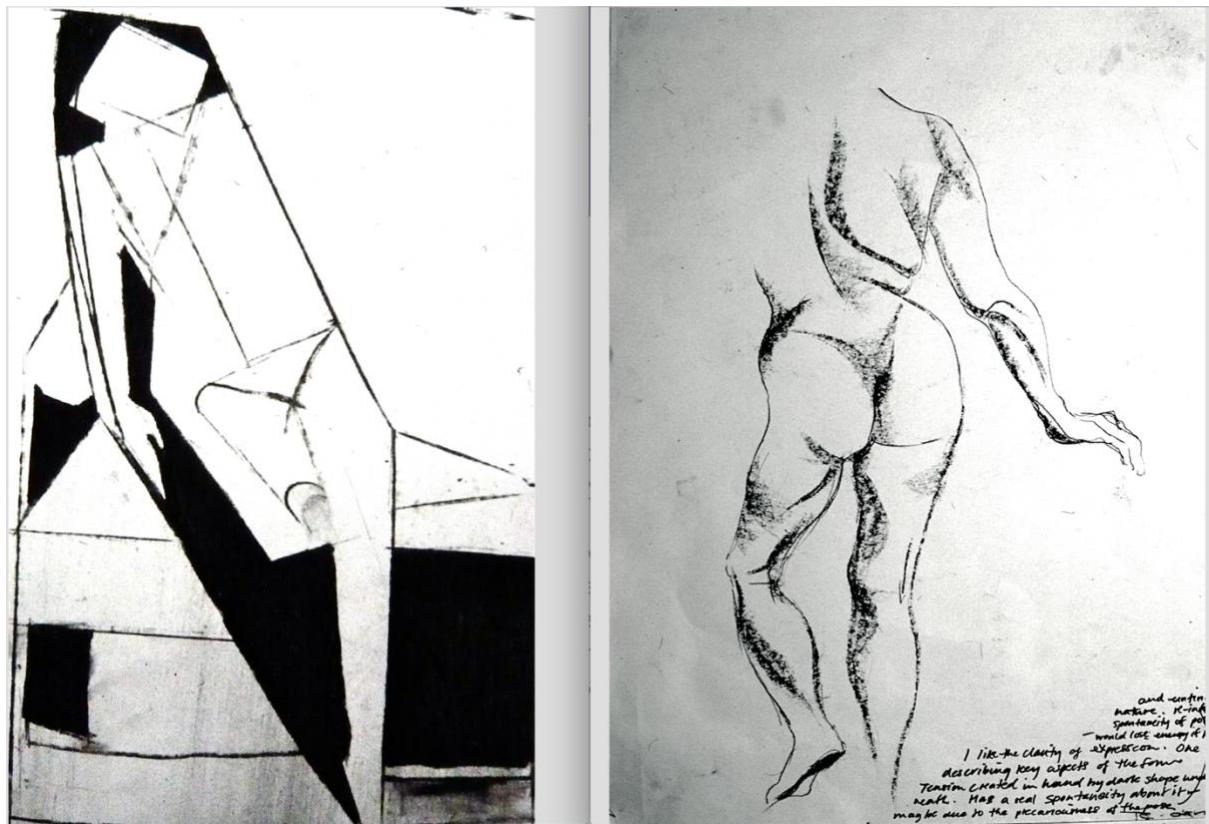
Such clear structuring of the art production process may be imparted both through illustrated talks and through one-to-one discussion over the student's work.



**Figure 6** *Three Functions of Visual Communication.*

For example, in Figure 7 although both drawings represent the same subject-matter in similar format, from a similar compositional choice of viewpoint positioning the viewer in front of

the action, the choices from the paradigms of body poses, line quality and tonal range in each image invite the viewer to adopt distinctly different moods and attitudes towards the model.



**Figure 7 L)** Ashley Hay (1<sup>st</sup> year BA)

**R)** Robyn O'Grady (1<sup>st</sup> year BA)

#### ***4 Strategies of creative communication***

All codes of communication operate through the selection of appropriate signs from the available paradigms, and the combination of those selections according to the conventions of the code. Roman Jakobson theorized the two poetic devices of 'metaphor' and 'metonym' as characteristic tropes through which the poetic, or compositional, function of communication operates. Metaphor, of course, refers to the description of one thing (the 'tenor') in terms of another (the 'vehicle'): in Figure 8 the negative connotations of the vehicle (the slowness of the snail) are applied to the tenor (concept of 'progress').



**Figure 8** Tom Alberts (BA graduate) *Progress*. Oil on canvas, 100x80cms.

Metonymy refers to the process whereby one sign becomes contiguously associated with another: in Figure 9 the residual marks on each sheet are metonymic - they are attributes of a variety of objects, sources of the forces which were applied to the paper: compression, tension, torsion and shear, together with rubbings of various surfaces. Here is evidence of the student's ability to move away from conventional representations of the visible world, towards a fresh representation of the *forces which form* the visible world. Here too is evidence of the efficacy of the new teaching programme in empowering a student to discover new directions of visual research.





**Figure 9** Ashley Hay (1<sup>st</sup> year BA) *Metonyms of Force*. Hanging construction of sheets imprinted with indices of various forces applied through a variety of objects.

An understanding of the power of these devices as vehicles to make visual equivalences of conceptual ideas will surely empower students' practice.

Other rhetorical tropes can also be employed to good effect in practice, and so oxymoron, irony and pun might usefully be introduced and applied in students' work.

### ***5 Art production as a process of transformation***

Ultimately, visual art practice is construed as a 'process of transformation' which may be explored through drawing, informing work developed through the full gamut of media and processes available to the student in whatever discipline they choose to specialise.

- Transformation from concept or percept to artwork via systems of geometry, lens-based and/or time-based media or three-dimensional materials (the tradition of representationalism)

- Transformation of individual perceptions into social communication (the tradition of expressionism)
- Transformation of cultural values into material form (the tradition of art as socio-political comment, or, more contemporaneously, intervention in the social process through site-specific installations, performances, multi-media presentations)

And transformation of abstract concepts into visible percepts:

Having mentioned earlier the anaesthesia effected by language upon our perceptions of the world, the question arises: can drawing be applied to the task of revealing—making visible—this deception of our own making?

I have chosen to take on the challenge of finding visual equivalents for an abstract proposition, one at the heart of my argument: the stimulus for the series of images, Figures 10-12, *Seeing Through Writing*, (*double entendre* intended!) was the recognition that language structures our realities, implying that we use it to structure order out of chaos, and also to remind us that it was our prior facility for iconic depiction that enabled the emergence and development of written symbolic codes.

The descriptive comments related to each illustration are by no means definitive statements of absolute meanings, but are offered as examples of how the ‘poetic’ function of communication might stimulate readers/viewers to negotiate their own interpretations, their own modal responses to their experiences of the overall theme.



**Figure 10** Howard Riley *Seeing Through Writing 2*. Oil pastel, graphite, charcoal, pencil and collage on Saunders Waterford 300gsm paper, A3 size.

When the viewer engages with each of these three drawings at the level of general layout, then a common syntax may be discerned in their composition, most clearly in Figure 10: the central position of the square, resting on a horizontal line effectively dividing background (in Western convention, the upper section of the picture-plane) from foreground (lower section of picture-plane), connotes physical stability and epitomises visual balance. Metaphorically, the square invites interpretation as the visible representation of the stability and dependability of our innate structuring capacity; through this compositional syntax, the variety of transformative changes from background to foreground, chaos to order in the form of symbolic writing, is illustrated in each of the drawings.

But each drawing has variations in its qualities of individual marks. For example, in Figure 10 the sharpness of the contrast boundaries separating shapes of tone and texture, and the



apparent transparency of the symbols in the foreground (through which we glimpse the material chaos represented in the background) connote the assumed reliability of language to structure chaos into order.



**Figure 11** Howard Riley *Seeing Through Writing 3*. Oil pastel, pen and ink on A5 paper, framed under glass.

However, once the clarity of surfaces and edges is reduced as in Figures 11 and 12, and the drawings glazed for exhibition display, then visual relationships between the drawing surface, the viewer's movement and the environmental context - hitherto suppressed - become apparent. Glass, a material which has often been regarded as a hindrance to the single focus upon the artwork, here affords multiples of visual focus, a metaphor for the layers of meaning available to the viewer once the foregrounded filter of language has been dissolved. And of course, as the viewer shifts position, a constant restructuring of the arrays of light arriving at the eyes, both from the reflective surface and the drawing itself, stimulates enhanced perceptual intrigue conducive to challenging the complacencies of seeing.



**Figure 12** Howard Riley *Seeing Through Writing 5*. Oil pastel, pen and ink on A5 paper, framed under glass.

Do these ambiguities raise questions about the direction in which our capacity for structuring operates? Do we see the world through language, or language through the world? The foregrounded emergent symbols in Figures 11 and 12 are embedded, integrated, within their spatial contexts: language and the material world are one – which is matter, which is meaning? (Halliday 2005).

Symbolic language, in all its written forms, appears to have emerged from a background world of visual ambiguity, *via* our innate capacity for structuring chaos into order, and has permeated our observations of the material world to such an extent that the two have become one: language is the filter through which we perceive the world, it becomes transparent, interwoven with our perception of the fabric of the material world, yet its visible form – writing – remains forever arbitrary, forever open to negotiation.



The compositional devices illustrated and discussed here serve to estrange writing from its referents, thus drawing affords, reveals an understanding of the treason – not of images (*pace* Magritte) – but of language itself.

Learning to draw, while no longer a privileged activity in either school or specialist art teaching, remains an activity of enormous importance and potency for education as a whole. Learning to observe, to investigate, to analyse, to compare, to critique, to select, to imagine, to play and to invent constitutes the veritable paradigm of functioning effectively in the world.  
(Petherbridge 2010: 233)

As rugby referees are wont to warn teams in possession of the ball but with no urgency to play it, so I exhort those still in possession of the ability for teaching drawing: *Use it or lose it!*

## Endnotes

1 A drive with a long history! Recent research (Hoffman et al. February 2018a) dates some cave drawings to c.65,000 BP (before the present), placing them firmly within the Neanderthal period, and dramatically closer to the development of speech as a codified means of communication, estimated as between 70,000 and 100,000 years ago. It should be noted that this date of c65,000 BP is itself challenged by Slimak (et al. September 2018) on grounds of scientific dating techniques: they argue a date of 47,000 BP is more consistent with the archaeological background. However, Hoffman (et al. October 2018b) refute the challenge. Watch this space!

We were certainly drawing long before we were writing; Denise Schmandt-Besserat (n.d: 6) suggests a date of c.5,000 BP in Mesopotamia for the first writing – codified marks upon a surface - to represent speech. In fact, our facility for depiction gave birth to the very notion of written language. *Visualcy* preceded – facilitated – literacy.

2 There are alternative models which might alleviate the perceived threat to the integrity of the fine art curriculum. Katrine Hjelde's (2015:185) useful article offers examples to "...initiate further research in E & E (Enterprise and Employability) in the art school."

3 Brecht first used this term in an essay of 1936 titled *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting*. John Willett (1964: 91) defines it thus: "Playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious".

4 This version of the French common translation of Brecht's neologism *Verfremdungseffekt* is favoured by Ranciere's translator, Steven Corcoran (Ranciere 2009: 49).

5 'Altermodernism' is a term coined by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in 2009 on the occasion of the Tate *Triennial* to showcase art made as a comment on standardisation and commercialism, in the context of neoliberalism and globalisation.

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